

THE CAROLINA SPARTAN.

BY CAVIS & TRIMMIER.

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T. O. P. VERNON, Associate Editor.

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THE MISSING LETTER.

VII.

Four years more passed on. It was the dinner-hour at Hill House Farm, an hour after mid-day. Mr. Sterling, the farm's occupant, and his daughter sat down to it alone. The farmer was sinking into years, and latterly he had been full of ailments, had grown short of breath and wheezy on the chest, and could not look after his outdoor pursuits as formerly. His daughter was of quiet, gentle manners, not beautiful, but full of earnest truth and kindness. It was singular that the farmer's only child, who was admired wherever she was known, and who would be the inheritor of his substance, should have gained her six and twentieth year without having changed her name, but she laughingly answered, when joked about it, that she could not afford to leave her father and mother.

"Shall I carve to-day, father, or will you?" inquired Anne.

"You carve, child. Cut for your mother first."

But Anne chose first of all to help her father. The disk was boiled beef, and she was careful to cut it for him as he best liked it. Appetite never failed with Farmer Sterling. She then rose to take up her mother's dinner.

"Hallo, Anne!" cried the farmer, "what are you leaving the table for? Where's Molly, that she can't take that up?"

"Molly has so much to do to-day," was his daughter's reply. "There's Martha's work, as well as her own; and with her weak knee she will not be able to stir when night comes, if she has to run up and down stairs. I shall be there and back in a minute."

When dinner was over, the farmer drew his arm chair close to the fire. Anne gave him his pipe and tobacco, set his jug of ale beside him, and then went up to her mother's chamber. She smoothed the bed and the pillows, changed her mother's cap for a smarter one, in case any neighbors dropped in, put some lavender-water on her handkerchief, and gave her her usual glass of wine.

"What else can I do, mother?" she asked.

"Nothing, my dear. Sit down and be still—you must be tired helping Molly so much this morning—unless you will read a psalm. The book is here."

Anne Sterling took the prayer book, and read the evening psalms for the day. Her accent and manner of reading were those of a gentleman, practically inured as she was to inferior household occupations. She then sat talking, till after a while, her mother seemed inclined to sleep; so Anne softly left the room, and went down stairs into the kitchen. It was then four o'clock.

"Well, Molly, how are you getting on?"

"Oh, pretty well," responded the old servant, who was a fixture in the family. "Martha hadn't need to go gadding out for a holiday every day, though. I'm off now into the dairy."

"Is my father gone into the fields?" inquired Miss Sterling.

"I hadn't seen nor heard him since dinner."

"What, all this while? Then he must have dropped asleep?"

As Anne spoke, she went along the passage to the sitting room, and soon a wild shriek reached Molly's ears. The latter ran after her, as well as her lame leg would allow.

Farmer Sterling was in a fit. His pipe lay broken on the ground, and his head had fallen on the elbow of his chair, his eyes staring, and froth issuing from his lips. Molly screamed out that it was apoplexy.

"Hill be gone," she uttered, "unless something can be done. He's going fast. However can we get the doctor here in time?"

Anne Sterling, pale as a sheet, gathered her sacred senses together. "I will run into Layton for the doctor," she said; "you would never get there. Hold his head up and rub his hand while I am gone."

She darted off without bonnet or shawl across the fold-yard into the lane, which was the nearest way to the little town of Layton, flying along as if for her life. It was dirty, and the mud splashed up with every step. A laborer, in a smock-frock, who was at work in a contiguous field, started at her with astonishment, and strided to the stile to look at her as she passed.

"Oh, she cried, as she darted up to him, her heart leaping at the sight of a human being, one who might perhaps be of service, 'if you can run quicker than I, pray go for me into Layton. My father—I—I did not notice that it was you,' she abruptly broke off; 'I beg your pardon.' And, swifter if possible than before, she flew on her way down the lane.

She was scarcely more than thirty years of age, yet lines of care were in his face, and silver was mixed with his luxuriant hair, but his countenance was open and pleasant to look upon. He was a tall, agile man, and he leaped the stile and overtook Anne.

"Miss Sterling! Miss Sterling!" he impressively said, as he came up with her, and strange to say—strange when contrasted with his dress and his mental occupation, his words and bearing were those of an educated and refined man; "you are in some dis-

stress. Though it is I—myself though I am a banned, persecuted outcast, need that neutralize any aid I can render? Surely no curse will follow that. What can I do for you?"

She hesitated. Her breath was getting short, her legs were aching, and she felt she could not keep up this pace long. What though he was pointed at amongst his fellow-men as a criminal, who, by luck, not merit, had escaped the hulks, was not her father dying for want of aid? Yes, she would waive prejudice at this time of need.

"My father is in a fit," she panted. "If you can get Mr. Jelf to him quicker than I can, we should be ever thankful to you. I fear it is apoplexy."

"Apoplexy!" he repeated; "then no time should be lost, Miss Sterling. It must be half an hour before Mr. Jelf can be with him, even should he be at home. He must be bled instantly. Is there no one in the house who can do it?"

She shook her head as she ran on, for she had not halted in her pace. "Not a soul in the house but Molly—save my mother, who is bedridden."

"Then I had better go back to your house—if I may be permitted me to enter it," and he spoke the last words with conscious indecision. "I may be able to do something; if you can go on for Mr. Jelf."

"Be it so," she answered. "Lose no time." He sped back swiftly, and entered the house by way of the kitchen. He knew the locality well. There was no one about, but he heard the voice of Molly—he remembered that well, also—calling out in a sobbing, startling tone, to know who was there.

She started much more when he went in and she saw who it was. A look of blank dismay, not unminged with resentment, overspread her countenance.

"What do you want, Master Ledbetter? What brings you here?"

"I come to render aid—if any be in my power. By Miss Sterling's desire," he added, distinctly. "By the time the doctor got here he would be past all aid; he continued looking at the unfortunate man. 'Get me a wash-basin, and some linen to make a bandage. Have you any hot water?'"

"Yes," sobbed Molly, "a boiler full. I put it on to wash out my kitchen."

"Then get a bucket of it, and bring in all the mustard you have in the house, while I take off his shoes and stockings. Make haste. We may restore him yet."

John Ledbetter spoke with an air of authority, and Molly, to her astonishment, obeyed, much as she despised him. Little time lost he. There was no lancet at hand, but he bared the farmer's arm; and used his own sharp penknife. He was an intelligent man, knew something of surgery, and when Anne Sterling returned she found her father had been rescued from immediate danger. Mr. Jelf was not with her; he was on the other side of Layton, visiting a patient, but they had sent after him. A neighbor or two returned with Anne.

"He ain't in no favor with honest folks, that John Ledbetter," remarked Molly to Miss Sterling, when she came in; "but sure as we are sinful creatures, you may thank him, Miss Anne, that you have got a living father. He was at the last gasp."

He did more besides restoring him. He was strong and active, and with little help from the women, he got Mr. Sterling upstairs, undressed him, and placed him in bed. "I will remain and watch him, with your permission," he said, looking at Anne, "till the surgeon comes."

"If you will kindly do so," she answered, "I am very grateful to you, indeed I am; she added, through her tears, as she kindly held out her hand to him. "My mother will not know how to thank you when she hears that to you, under Heaven, he owes his life."

Mr. Ledbetter did not take her offered hand. He extended his own, and turned it round from side to side, as if to exhibit its horny, rough texture, bearing the impress of hard, out-door work, whilst a peculiar smile of mockery and bitterness rose to his face. "It is not so fitting as it once was to come in contact with a lady's; he observed; these last six years have left their traces on it. You would say, also, as the world says, that those marks than those of your age, as Cain bore his."

She looked distressed. What was there that she could answer?

"And yet, Anne—pardon me, the familiar name rose inadvertently, not from disrespect; I used to call you so, and you have never since, in my mind, been anything but Anne Sterling—what if I were to assert that the traces of—usage are the worst guilt of which that hand can rightly be accused—that it is dyed with no deeper crime? What then?"

"I don't know," she faltered.

"I do, he answered. 'You would throw my assertion to the winds, as others did, and leave me to toil, and blanch, and die in them, rather than accord me the sympathy so necessary from man to man, even though it were but the sympathy of pity. A messenger of Heaven might whisper such to a fallen angel!'"

Farmer Sterling got better, but only for a time, and a very short one—hardly long enough, as the old gentleman himself said, to make his peace with his Maker. He never left his bed again. Mrs. Sterling, whose disorder appeared to abate, and her strength to revive with the necessity of the case, now managed to reach her husband's room daily, and to sit with him for several hours.

About three weeks subsequently to the farmer's attack, his daughter went to High-am by the morning coach, to see her cousin, Mrs. Gramme. As she entered the passage of the house, the office was on her right, and Mr. Gramme was there, stamping some letters. Anne waited a moment, thinking he might see her, and she observed that his eyes were red, and his hands

sticking.

"Good morning, Walter," she said, at length. "Is Selina up-stairs?"

The postmaster looked up. "What, is it you, Anne? You have just come, I suppose. How is the old gentleman?"

"He is better, but gains no strength, and does not get up. This is the first day he has seemed sufficiently comfortable for me to leave him, or I should have been in to see Selina before."

"And I have been so bothered with one thing or other that I have not had a minute to ride over. What tale's that about Ledbetter having saved his life?"

"He certainly did. My father must have been dead before the surgeon came, had it not been for John Ledbetter. He applied the necessary remedies, and bled him as handily and effectually as Mr. Jelf could have done."

"Ah, women are easily frightened," carelessly repeated the postmaster. "You came across him, we heard, as you were running into Layton for Jelf."

"It was so."

"Well, then I must tell you, Anne, that I contradicted that report—for I never could believe that you would have permitted yourself to hold speech with such a character, still less to admit him inside the house."

"Not to save my father?" returned Anne. "I would use any means, any instrument, when his life was at stake."

"You did not know it would save his life, as postmaster. In any case, I don't think he will keep it long, for if he could stave off pecuniary ruin, his health is so shattered that he is unfit to hold it. I now thank my dear aunt that she was firm in having my \$1,500 settled on myself. The interest of it is not much, but, if the worst comes to the worst, it may buy dry bread to keep me and these poor children from starvation, and pay for a garret to lodge in."

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"How is the baby?" inquired Anne, by way of turning the conversation.

"Oh, it's well enough, if one may judge by its squalling. I never heard a young one with such lungs. I think Selina must manage it badly. You'll find them all upstairs."

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Anne went up and kissed her. "What are you doing here, with these crying children, Selina?" she said.

"Oh, dear, do try and quiet them, Anne! Mrs. Gramme helplessly uttered, bursting into tears; 'my very life is harassed out of me. Since the nurse left, I have had the trouble of them all day.'

Miss Sterling threw her bonnet and shawl on the bed, and taking a paper of home-made cakes from her pocket, drew the elder child's eye toward them. The tears were arrested halfway, the mouth remained open, and the noise ceased.

"These cakes are for good little boys who don't cry," said Anne, seating the young gentleman on the floor, and putting some into his pinnace. Then she took the infant from his mother, and carried it into the room. When soothed to silence and sleep, she sat down with it on her knee.

"Selina," she began, "I am not going to tell you now that you are a bad manager, for I have told you that often enough when you were well. But how comes it that you have no nurse?"

"Ask Walter," replied Mrs. Gramme, a look of resentment escaping with her tone.

"Now be calm and speak quietly of things. You surely purpose taking a maid for the children?"

"I purpose," bitterly retorted Mrs. Gramme; "it is of very little use what I purpose or want. Walter squanders the money away on his own pleasures, and we cannot afford to keep two servants. Now you have the plain truth, Anne."

"I have thought," resumed Miss Sterling, after an awkward pause, "that you have sometimes appeared not quite at your ease as to money. But a case like this is one of necessity; your health is at stake, and it is Mr. Gramme's duty to provide an additional servant, if only for a few months."

"Listen Anne," resumed Mrs. Gramme, speaking with an excitement her cousin in vain endeavored to arrest. "You thought I married well; that if Walter had been living freely, as a young man, and anticipated his inheritance, he was steady then, and a good home to bring me to, and a liberal salary. You thought this—my uncle and aunt thought it—I thought it. But what were the facts? Before that child was born—and she pointed to the little cake-eater—I found he was over head and ears in debt, and they have been augmenting ever since. His quarter's salary, when paid, only serves to stop the most pressing, and supply his private expenses, of which he appears to have abundance. Such expenses are shameful for a married man."

"Oh, Selina,"

"Oh! how can I be calm! I wish I had been a thousand miles off, before I consented to marry him! I never did love him. Don't look reprovingly at me, Anne; it is the truth. I loved but one, and that was John Ledbetter. When he turned out worthless I thought my heart should have broken, though I carried it off with a high band to him, for I was bitterly incensed against him. Then came Walter Gramme, with his insinuating whispers and his handsome person, and talked me into a liking for him. And then into a marriage."

"Selina," interrupted Miss Sterling, "you should not speak so of your husband, even to me."

"I shall speak to the world, perhaps, by-and-by; he speaks me enough for it. Night after night, night after night, since from a few months after our marriage, does he spend away from me. In 'what society, think you?' He comes home here towards morning, sometimes sober, and then I know where he has been, for I have heard; but often he comes staggering home from the public-house, primed with drink and smoke. Dearest!"

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"I should not so much care now, for I have grown inured to it, and my former reproaches—how useless they were!—have given place to silent scorn and hatred, were it not for the money these habits of his consume. Circumstances have grown very bad with us; of money there seems to be none; and it is with difficulty we provide for our daily wants, for tradespeople refuse us credit. How then can I bring another servant into the house when we can hardly keep the one we have?"

"This state of things must be killing her," thought Anne Sterling, as she listened and shivered.

"What it will come to I don't know," proceeded the invalid, "but a break up seems inevitable, and then he will lose his situation as postmaster. In any case, I don't think he will keep it long, for if he could stave off pecuniary ruin, his health is so shattered that he is unfit to hold it. I now thank my dear aunt that she was firm in having my \$1,500 settled on myself. The interest of it is not much, but, if the worst comes to the worst, it may buy dry bread to keep me and these poor children from starvation, and pay for a garret to lodge in."

"Oh, Selina!" uttered Miss Sterling, as the tears ran down her cheeks, "how terribly you shock me!"

"I have never betrayed this to a human being till now. You may have thought me grown cold, capricious, ill-natured—no doubt you have, Anne, often, when you have come here. Not long ago, you said how marriage seemed so have altered me. But now you see what I have had to try me, the sort of existence mine has been."

"What can I do for you?—how can I help?" inquired Anne. "Were my father well, I would take little Walter home with me, and relieve you of him for a time, but his state demands perfect quiet in the house. Money, beyond a trifle, I have not of my own, to offer; perhaps my mother, when she knows, will—"

"She must not know," vehemently interrupted Mrs. Gramme. "I forbid you to tell her, Anne—I forbid you to tell any one. As to money, if you were to put a hundred pounds down before me this minute, I would say, throw it rather into the first ditch you come to, for it would only be squandered, by him, on his orgies and his debts. No, let the crisis come the sooner the better. Things may be smoother after it, at any rate, quieter for as it is the house is dunned by creditors. Oh, Anne! if it were not for these children I would come back and find peace at the farm, if you would give me shelter. But now—to go from my own selfish troubles—tell me about my uncle. To think that it should be John Ledbetter, of all people, who came in to his help! Walter went on in a fine way about it, in one of his halfpenny moods. He has an unconquerable hatred to him, as powerful as it is lasting. I suppose it arises from his knowing I was once so attached to him."

"Selina," returned Miss Sterling, lowering her voice, "you will say it is a strange fancy of mine, but from a few words John Ledbetter spoke to me, the evening of my father's attack, I have been doubting whether he was guilty."

"What can you mean?" demanded Mrs. Gramme, with startling fervor. "What grounds have you? Did he assert his innocence?"

"On the contrary, he seemed rather to let me assume his guilt. He said that of course I believed him guilty, like the rest of the world; and then followed a hint that he could assert his innocence. But his manner said more than his words. It was so peculiar, so haughtily independent, betraying the self-reliance of an innocent man, smarting under stinging sense of injury. I do believe—"

"Don't go on, Anne," interposed Mrs. Gramme, with a shudder. "If it should ever turn out that John Ledbetter was accused unjustly, that I, of all others, helped to ruin and scorn him, my sum of misery would be complete, and I must go mad or die. I suppose you have seen him but that once."

"Indeed we have. He called the next day, and Molly let him go up to see my father."

"In his smock-frock?" interposed Mrs. Gramme, in a half-droic tone.

"We have never seen him in anything else, except on Sundays, and then he is dressed as a gentleman. He comes every day now."

"He?"

"He proffered his services to me and my mother, if he could be of any use about the farm. We were at terrible fault for some one to replace my father, and a few things he undertook were so well executed that they led to more. Now he is regularly working for us."

Mrs. Gramme leaned her head upon her hand and mused. "Is he much altered?" she asked.

"Oh, yes. His hair is going gray, and his countenance has a look of care I never thought to see on one so smiling and sunny as was John Ledbetter."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

A London Review, in answer to the question, "What is man?" says "Chemically speaking, a man is forty-five pounds of carbon and nitrogen, diffused through five and a half pails of water."

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